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The American University in Cairo

School of Global Affairs and Public Policy

**The Myth of Syrian-Egyptian Marriages After 2011: The Struggle for
Livelihoods of Syrian Women in Cairo.**

A Thesis submitted to

the Cynthia Nelson Institute for Gender and Women's Studies

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Master of Arts in Gender and Women's Studies
in Middle East/ North Africa

Specialization in Gender and Women's Studies Middle East and North Africa

By Dina Khaled El Sherbiny

Under the supervision of Dr. Martina Rieker

May 2015

Dedication

Because thank you is not enough to reveal my gratitude and appreciation to my father I dedicate this thesis to him, which is the least I can do...

I dedicate this thesis to my Father, Eng. Khaled El Sherbiny who dedicated his life to me since I was born. To the one who loves me unconditionally and cares for me through out my life. You taught me to strive for my dreams. I owe to you every single breath I am taking now; I am what I am today because of you. He is the driving force of my life, who pushes me from success to success. You have supported me with all your means, not only through the years of studies, but also through out my entire life. To my father, who believed in me, the richness of knowledge and pushed me to further studies. He taught me the best kind of knowledge can be accomplished after hard work and this is what I did. You have been and will always be a constant source of support, inspiration and motivation during my academic years. I will always appreciate what you did for me whether on academic or personal levels. I hope that this work makes my father proud of me as I have always been proud of him.

Thank you for your endless love, support and encouragement...

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, all thanks to Allah for his blessings, of which the thesis is one among many...

My warmest gratitude goes to Professor Dr. Martina Rieker, the Director of the Institute for Gender and Women's Studies, my thesis supervisor. I would like to thank Dr. Rieker for her guidance, assistance, and encouragement. Thank you for the valuable comments, prompt feedback and generous support that made this thesis possible.

I would like to thank Dr Hani Sayed, my first reader and Dr. Jennifer Terrell, my second reader, for their support and feedback throughout my journey at AUC.

My sincere gratitude goes to my amazing mother who accompanies me in every stage of my life. Her unconditional love, patience and support gave me the push to continue my studies and achieve my goals. She is the motivator who discovered in me many hidden abilities and believes that my future starts from here. She believes in my capabilities and continues to push me to further enrich my knowledge.

I would like to sincerely thank my wonderful brothers, Ahmed and Mohamed EL Sherbiny for their outstanding support, help and patience. Their continuous guidance provided me with hope during all the periods of stress and frustration. I would not have done the thesis without you being there.

I would also like to thank my adorable little sister, Hana El Sherbiny, who despite her young age, supported me all the way through the thesis writing process. Her patience and understanding pushed me to make this thesis come to life.

I am proud of my family who supports me and pushes its members to gain more knowledge in their life.

Finally, I want to thank all the incredible Syrian women who agreed to talk with me without which this thesis would not have been possible.

Abstract

The Myth of Syrian-Egyptian Marriages After 2011: The Struggle for Livelihoods of Syrian Women in Cairo.

Dina Khaled El Sherbiny

This thesis investigates the myth of Syrian-Egyptian marriages and its effects in Egypt in 2013-2014. It explores the relationships between migration and marriage, public moral panics about jobs and men, and the everyday lived realities of refugee Syrian women in Egypt. The thesis investigates the media frenzy concerning the problem of Egyptian-Syrian marriages and its effects on the perceptions of Syrian women on the part of the Egyptian public. It traces the booming industry of marriage brokers on Facebook, as well as the critical engagements with this category on the part of the Syrian community, especially women. Finally, the thesis analyzes Syrian women's livelihood strategies within but also beyond migration marriages.

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Table of Contents

Dedication

Acknowledgements

Abstract

Chapter 1: The Myth of Syrian-Egyptian Marriages After 2011

Overview: Thesis Question

Introduction: Research Problem, Context, and Justification

Literature Review

Conceptual Framework

Fieldwork

Chapter Outline

Chapter 2: Syrian -Egyptian Marriages: Contesting Egyptian Media Representations

Syrian Women's Reflections on Syrian -Egyptian Marriages

The Politics of Charity and Job Markets

Chapter 3: Marriage Brokers, the Creation of New Markets and Social Media

The History of Matchmaking in Egypt:

The Emerging Role of Brokers in Syrian-Egyptian Marriages

Facebook and its Role in Syrian-Egyptian Marriages

Economic Transactions in Cross-border Marriages

Chapter 4: New Families, Networking and Building Syrian Communities in Egypt

Families

Community Building and Networking through Mosques and Non-Governmental Organizations

Concluding Thoughts

Bibliography

Chapter 1

The Myth of Syrian-Egyptian Marriages After 2011

Overview: Thesis Question

I began this research in late 2012 inspired by the circulation of Syrian-Egyptian marriages as a problem in the Egyptian public sphere. My initial intention was to explore the relationship between cross border marriages and sex trafficking. Upon embarking on my fieldwork I immediately was confronted by the resistance of my interlocutors in acknowledging Syrian-Egyptian marriages as a phenomena. After the overthrow of President Morsi in July 2013, and halfway through my fieldwork, the so-called problem of Egyptian-Syrian marriages vanished from the Egyptian media and larger public sphere. I came to understand the political construction of Egyptian-Syrian marriages as one node in the internal power struggles in Egypt. This thesis hence explores struggles for livelihoods among Syrian women that came to Egypt of which marriage is but one of many strategies for survival. It aims to contribute to the literature that seeks to understand more fully the everyday life of migrant/ refugee women as active women who exercise agency and choice.

Introduction: Research Problem, Context, and Justification

The revolutions of 2011 have significantly impacted population movements and refugee administration across the Arab region. The outbreak of the civil war in Syria in 2011 has led to the regions largest internal and external displacement of population. By 2015 three million Syrians registered as refugees predominantly in Lebanon, Jordan,

Turkey (UNHCR 2015). According to the Egyptian government, 133,000 Syrians have formally registered as refugees in Egypt. Egypt has a long history as a transit country, particularly for African migrants. Formal procedures for registering as a refugee begins with an application of a yellow card for asylum seekers, followed by the blue card as formally recognized refugees, and eventually registration with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Ayoub & Khallaf, 2014). While Syrians were permitted to come to Egypt without obtaining a prior visa, receiving a tourist visa at the airport that enabled them to stay in Egypt for 3 months (Ayoub & Khallaf, 2014), due to the massive influx of Syrians special procedures were put in place to accommodate the flows particularly the ability to register and receive a renewable yellow card that permitted them to stay for eighteen months with “protection and assistance.” (ibid 2014)

Syrian refugees were disproportionally impacted by Egypt’s own political trajectories following the January 25, 2011 revolution. I conducted my fieldwork during three distinct political phases in Egypt: Muslim Brotherhood rule represented by President Morsi (July 2012 to July 2013), followed by the interim President Mansour (July 2013 to June 2014) and the beginning of the rule of President El Sisi (June 2014). President Morsi’s open door policy not only permitted Syrians to come to Egypt without visa restrictions (UNHCR 2014; Akram, Bidinger, Hites, Kuzmova, Lang, & Nouredin, 2014), but also provided them with access to free education and health care. In a speech given at Cairo Stadium in conjunction with a national conference in support of the Syrian uprising Morsi announced the cutting of diplomatic relationships with the Asad regime in Damascus (Mohsen 2013), “ We, as Egyptians support the Syrian people to obtain their freedom... The shedding of the Syrian people’s blood must stop.” (Ayoub & Khallaf

2014). With the overthrow of Muhammad Morsi on June 30, 2013 this policy was reversed. The instability in Egypt affected all refugee populations. Yet the open door policy for Syrian refugees made them a target within the larger public sphere, Syrians being accused of everything from taking scarce jobs to hindering marriage opportunities for Egyptians. While Syrian-Egyptian marriages were by no means a new phenomena, what emerged as new was the public interest in these marriages, the motivations and reasons behind such marriages following the on-going conflicts in Syria. In an article published in Ahram newspaper on April 13, 2013, a government owned daily, the number of such marriages it was argued had already exceeded 12,000. A follow up report by the National Council of Women on May 15, 2013 suggested that these marriages constituted human trafficking, and that the price for a Syrian woman in Egypt was 500 LE. Upon investigating these figures, however, the National Council of Women found that only 107 such marriages had been formally registered for the year 2013. This thesis takes a closer look at the relationships between migration and marriage, public moral panics about jobs and men, and the everyday lived realities of refugee Syrian women in Egypt.

Literature Review

Over the past decade a growing body of literature has critically engaged and challenged dominant constructions of migrant and refugee women as victims, vulnerable and passive subjects in need of rescue (cf Aradau, (2008); Davidson (2006); Hua (2011).

Furthermore, attention to questions concerning the conditions whereby migratory subjects are made visible as objects of knowledge (Maalki 1995) for purposes of humanitarian governmentality (Agier 2011) has impacted the study of specific local migratory contexts. Questions of agency hence have defined the study of migration and migratory marriages.

In her study tracing ways in which young Ethiopian, Eritrean and Somali women negotiate, navigate and challenge domestic labor in Yemen, De Regt (2010) highlights the politics of desire and agency of migratory subjects. Likewise, the large body of work on migratory marriages has increasingly moved beyond stereotypical conceptions of women as passive subjects caught in impossible situations, to careful analyses of women's agency despite oppressive inequalities in host countries. In their respective work Charsley (2005) and Constable (2005) go beyond narratives of men as consumers shopping for "obedient wives," emphasizing the choices women makes whatever constraints define their situations. Vecchio (2008), Minervini & McAndrew (2006) highlight the significance of women's active decision making through the entire process of migration and/ or arranging for cross-border marriages.

Women, so De Regt (2010), not only do not passively follow their husbands in the migration process, but increasingly are making their own decisions, within or without their families, to migrate often leaving their husbands and children behind. The feminization of migration not only transforms power relationships within families, but in many instances also makes women the primary breadwinners of their households, nuclear or extended. De Regt's work points towards the transformative potential of the feminization of migration in both countries of origin and countries in which migrants live

and work. Hua (2011) argues that the attempts by governments and the humanitarian industry to capture migratory women as vulnerable subjects constitutes what she terms “the trafficking in women’s human rights.”

Networks, familial relationships, and the formation of new socialites, are at the center of much of much of recent work. In his study of migrant urban communities in Johannesburg Simone (2004) shows how people become the infrastructure that leads to “economic collaboration” and forges new possibilities in the navigation of the everyday. Collaboration processes, so Simone, forge new senses of community through everyday interactions and the sharing of resources. Malikki (2013) and Agier (2011) observe similar process in refugee camps. DeRegt (2010) shows how other modalities such shared religion replace nationality as common nodes for sociality in migratory contexts.

Cross-border marriages constitute a not insignificant percentage of the feminization of migration. In her work on cross-border marriages Constable (2005) studies the processes that go into the decision to marry outside the national context. Parents, and families, she argues play a significant role in the decision making of marriages across borders. She argues that parents are increasingly option to pressure their daughters to marry beyond national boundaries with high expectations for elevating the economic status of natal families. These expectations, her study shows, are mostly not realized. In her study Chia-Wen Lu (2005) likewise observes the economic motives of the family unit in cross-border marriages, sometimes also called marriages under duress. Villapondo (2000) argues that mail order brides in particular find themselves in precarious situations with family networks that could offer potential support being far

away. Hence, the ability to form new networks in the migratory context, so the literature, is a vital strategy for survival women in migratory relationships and contexts.

Chen (2013) shows that the growth of cross border marriages has been accompanied by a thriving industry be they local individuals or international agencies (see also Constable 2003). The business of cross-border marriages, and the abuse that it invites, led the US to issue the International Marriage Broker Regulation Act in 2005 to “protect women.” (Sims 2009) Constable (2012) argues that this act is part and parcel of the problem of stereotyping and assumptions of vulnerable women, particularly in the global south. It furthermore focuses only on cross border marriages, ignoring all other migratory situations that women find themselves in. According to Constable IMRA lacked concrete evidence of abuse, but was built on dominant assumptions that women are always victims that need to be rescued.

Sandal (2011) shows that cross-border marriages evolved historically to describe marriage to someone outside one’s village, town or kin network to the current definition of a marriage, mostly long distance, between citizens of different countries. Cross border marriage is a broader term that takes many different forms: arranged, mediated, or commercially arranged. Cross border marriages transcend social and cultural borders. Sharp (2010) furthermore differentiates between arranged and forced marriages. An arranged marriage, so Sharp, is a marriage that occurs through mediators with minimal decision making from the couple, whereas a forced marriage is defined by the complete absence of decision making by both partners. The US Anti-Social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act (2014) defines forced marriage as marriage that occurs under threat or coercion against the consent of the partners. The perspectives of my interlocutors on

these two terms were more complex. Some collapsed both terms, whereas others argued that arranged marriages were part and parcel of local cultural norms. Finally, questions of consent furthermore trouble the boundaries between these two categories.

According to Fulford (2013) migration marriages are a growing component of global migration, which impacts not only the private sphere but also the public sphere so Eggebo (2012). Migration marriages influence and transform family norms as well as border policies. Feldman, Shuzhuo & Ying (2014), for example, trace ways in which migration marriages in China are leading to “regional exchange and cultural integration.” Reasons for migration marriages are varied, ranging from social and economic imperatives to political instability. For most authors migration marriages constitute livelihood strategies in our contemporary world. According to Makhovskaya (2003 cited in Kim 2013) women in conflict zones often opt for migration marriages as a way out. Moreda (2012) defines livelihood to include income, access to labor markets and any activities that are deployed to sustain life. Hence, she argues that rather than limiting women’s options to migration marriage and thus reproducing vulnerability discourses, it is imperative to balance women’s options and include other strategies for sustaining life such as employment. Formulating research questions from a livelihood strategies perspective, so Moreda, allows for insights that cannot be simply reduced to vulnerability frameworks.

Conceptual Framework

Throughout my fieldwork concepts of networking and community building emerge as important survival strategies. These concepts denote the active role of migrants

in the host country. Migrant women resort to networking and community building as a way to survive in the host country beyond migrant marriages. Networking and community building also serves as a reaction to negative connotations that are associated with migrant women. The thesis analyzes cross-border marriages through the lens of women's agency. Constable (2003) argues that it is often presumed that women lack agency in selecting their spouses in migration marriages because they appear to not make an active choice. Siti Aisyah & Lyn Parker (2014) and Meyers (2002) remind us that there are many forms of agency given diverse norms and values. This thesis seeks to gain a fuller understanding of Syrian women's livelihood strategies in Egypt in which migrant marriages constitute one but by no means only mode of everyday survival.

Fieldwork

Fieldwork for this thesis was conducted between November 2013 and June 2014. It is based on interviews and focus groups with Syrian women in Giza and 6th of October City and Togammu Khamis both in the Greater Cairo area. I interviewed representatives of Cairo based aid organizations such as UNHCR, Caritas, and the Fard Foundation, dedicated to supporting Syrian families. While most of the conversations with Syrian refugee women took place in person over multiple meetings, some women were afraid to meet with me and preferred more impersonal modes of communication. Finally, I interviewed marriage brokers. Some of the marriage brokers were either resident in Syria, or if in Cairo, anxious to discuss their business except via telephone or email. I met most of my interlocutors through Tadamon, the Egyptian Refugee Multicultural Council, Tadamon offers handicraft-training workshops to enable lower middle class

Syrian women to acquire skills and enter the informal economy. I interviewed about fifty Syrian women over a six months period attending these workshops. Tadamon has three branches in the Greater Cairo area in 6 October City, Ard el Lewa and on Faisal Street in Giza. The latter is the largest Tadamon branch which I selected for my fieldwork. I contacted Islamic Relief when I first began my fieldwork. Given the huge banner that was at that time displayed in the front of their Mohandesin branch building announcing its mission “To relief Syrian women in Egypt” I had assumed that this would constitute a productive second field site. They never responded to my requests, and upon visiting their offices it quickly became apparent that the Syrians visiting the branch came there solely to receive aid. Unlike the networking mandate of Tadamon, which allowed for in depth conversations with Syrian women, the “relief” framework of Islamic Relief was not productive for this thesis. Islamic Relief is focused on providing basic needs such as blankets, food coupons, children’s toys and medical aid (cf Akram, Bidinger, Hites, Kuzmova, Lang, & Nouredin, 2014) Additionally, Islamic Relief provided financial assistance to female headed households of Syrian families defined as “vulnerable refugees,” assisting them in enrolling their children in schools and securing livelihoods opportunities.

Social media, especially Facebook, played a significant role in the collection of data. Social media features a vibrant community in terms of service provision and debates on the subject of Syrian-Egyptian marriages. I contacted numerous web site administrators from marriage brokers to organizations to individuals. Many of the marriage brokers were nervous collaborating with me. Yet, upon condition of anonymity most people were willing to share their perspectives. The most important aspect of these

pages were the debates regarding Syrian-Egyptian marriages. For example, an Egyptian man posted a request for a Syrian wife on one of these sites. The rapid responses and comments to his post and others, opinions of Syrian men, Egyptian men, brokers and Syrian and Egyptian women provided a rich site for research. The web also allowed me to trace the controversial category of Syrian-Egyptian marriages as a term in and of itself.

Terminology was a constant struggle in my fieldwork. Many Syrian women, online and off line, rejected the category of “Syrian-Egyptian marriages,” suggesting that these are just ordinary marriages. Likewise, the concept of “mail-order bride” was deemed offensive on the part of my interlocutors, preferring the notion of “arranged marriages” instead. An arranged marriage, my interlocutors argued, is the outcome of two compatible spouses, whereas mail-order bride portrays women as a “sex object who did not have a choice, degrading women as commodities rather than acknowledging them as human beings that make choices.” Finally, echoing the intense debate in the Syrian community in Egypt in 2013, my interlocutors preferred to describe their situation in Cairo as that of immigrants rather than refugees.

Chapter Outlines

Chapter 2 focuses on the myth of Syrian-Egyptian marriages as it unfolded in the Egyptian public sphere in the year 2013 and its effects on the practices of cross-border marriage and marriages under duress. It explores the subjective experiences and reflections of Syrian women regarding Syrian-Egyptian marriages. Chapter 3 analyzes the emergence of marriage brokers as interlocutors in migration marriages. Chapter 4 traces Syrian women’s livelihood and networking strategies.

Chapter 4 sets out to examine parents' role in cross-border marriages and how Syrian women found their lost families through networking and community building. Power relations between family members can be a cause for marriage under duress, which will also be explained in this chapter. This chapter shows why parents prefer cross-border marriages and explain the different dimensions of their economic and social background. Moreover, Chapter 4 reveals the other picture of Syrian women who refutes the image of migrant women as being helpless in the host country, rather they all playing active roles that is further explained. They broke the borders of political, social and economic conditions and create room for them in Egypt. In a way, it challenges the dominant view that oppression, powerless are fundamental characteristics of migrant women who are considered as victims. MOBs are seen in another frame where they can network and build their own community within the host country. Chapter 5 is the conclusion of the thesis. It presents the main themes and arguments along with the findings of my fieldwork. I will compare between my hypothesis and the results of the interviews conducted, media reports and any other tools for collecting data.

Chapter 2

Syrian -Egyptian Marriages: Contesting Egyptian Media Representations

Asad (2003, 29 cited in Wright 2006) writes that “Myth [is] not merely a (mis) representation of the real. It [is] material for shaping the possibilities and limits of action. And in general it appears to have done this by feeding the desire to display the actual” (29). This chapter explores the media production of the myth of Egyptian -Syrian marriages under Muslim Brotherhood rule, and the critical engagement of Syrian women with the myth. It is based on interviews with twenty Syrian women, professional women especially medical doctors and teachers, and working class women. All the women I spoke with had strong feelings about the secular media’s vilification of the Syrian community, and especially the attention they gave to what they termed Syrian-Egyptian marriages.

With the unfolding of opposition to Morsi rule in 2013, the large influx of Syrians became one of the many targets of the media. Nationalist media made visible the phenomena of Syrian- Egyptian marriages, suggesting that Syrian refugee women strategically marry Egyptian men as a livelihoods strategy. In a feature piece in Ahram online, El Gundy (2013) identified mosques, Islamic preachers and Islamic charitable organizations as the main promoters of Syrian-Egyptian marriages. Calling upon Egyptian men to marry Syrians if they can do so financially, so El Gundy argues, was articulated as a noble act to save lives perpetuated under the umbrella of religion. El Gundy contacted one of these preachers, Mohamed Massad, at Hossary mosque in 6 of October City. Massad refused these allegations arguing that these rumors are part of a

strategy to discredit the image of Islamicists in Egypt. Due to these rumors, he contended, he was inundated with calls from Syrians angry about the false image of Syrian women in Egypt, but also with calls from Egyptian business men seeking “cheap” Syrian women. Shaykh Massad argued that Egyptians do not take advantage of the situation that Syrians face in Egypt, however, if an Egyptian man can afford to marry a Syrian woman and treats her well this is a scared act.

During the open door policy period the myth of the possibility of acquiring a Syrian wife for a small amount of money dominated the print media, and became a regular topic in popular talk shows. For example, 10 PM, a talk show on Dream Television, in a special episode focusing on Syrian-Egyptian marriages and the protection of Syrian women in Egypt, featured the Syrian actress Raghda in their March 25, 2013 episode. She explained that she sent her driver to Hossary Mosque in 6 October City from where he took one of the phone numbers from posters available at the mosque advertising Syrian women for marriage. Upon calling the number he spoke with an Egyptian broker and was told that “instead of marrying one Syrian woman you can marry two.” Al Youm Television portrayed the life of a Syrian mother and daughter in an April 25, 2013 episode. The women distanced themselves from the phenomena, acknowledging though that some women “in a certain category” that need money are at fault for the productivity of the myth, that is, in the words of one of the daughters, they perpetuate the impression that all Syrian women are available for 500-1000 LE. Talk show after talk show in the Spring of 2013 featured specials on the topic .

Due to frenzy of rumors with aggressive assistance from the media, the National Council for Women in Egypt condemned Syrian-Egyptian marriages in a statement

issued in March 2013, and called for an end to the phenomena in the name of exploitation of vulnerable women. For his article Gundy (2013) had interviewed Assem Al-Atassi, chairman of the Arab Association of Human Rights in Syria who now lives in Egypt. According to Al-Atassi, the purported 12,000 Syrian-Egyptian marriages reported in the media were exaggerated, and failed to distinguish between “normal” marriages and “forced illegal marriages.” A Syrian father in Egypt in an interview published by Al Monitor (2012) noted that it is the brokers that are to be held responsible for the popular image of Syrian families seeking Egyptian husbands for their daughters to secure the families livelihood in Egypt. The power of the myth according to this father is such that the only way he could stop brokers from calling him was to say that his daughter was already engaged.

With the overthrow of President Morsi the phenomena of Syrian-Egyptian marriages disappeared in the Egyptian public sphere. Commenting on the shift in attention, or put differently, the shift from a media frenzy to absolute silence, Nadia Ammar, who came to Egypt from Damascus in 2012 observed that “we do not know whether these marriages vanished or were subsequently ignored by the media , or if the conditions of Syrians in Egypt were just no longer a concern for the Egyptian public.” Nonetheless, Ammar observes that life under President Morsi’s open door policy was much easier for Syrians than what was to follow.

Syrian Women’s Reflections on Syrian -Egyptian Marriages

One of my Syrian interlocutors, Faten a 45 years old woman who lives with her mother in 6 October City, incensed by the rumors circulating around Hossary mosque as a broker for Syrian Egyptian marriages, decided to visit the mosque and its cultural center "because we are sick of being accused of marrying Egyptians." On the mosque's walls she found a poster noting "to marry Syrians call on this number." When she called she spoke with an Egyptian marriage broker who called himself Sheikh Saber. She told him that she was a desperate Syrian woman who wanted to get married. He replied "do you agree to be a second wife of a 45 years Egyptian man." For Faten and other interlocutors the question is: "Isn't there any other way to help Syrian women than marrying them to Egyptian men?" The media's campaign against Hossary mosque and others eventually forced them to distance themselves from the marriage business, placing a banner outside the mosque requesting "Please stop asking for Syrian brides" (Youssef & Ismail, 2013).

Rasha Maatai, the Syrian founder of the Fard Foundation, established in 2011 to assist Syrian families, had a more nuanced opinion of the situation. In her interview with me she argued that it's not the media that drives such arrangements. She noted that she witnessed more than three Syrian-Egyptian marriages, which are "normal and legal. If these marriages are not socially accepted, this does not mean that they are illegal or degrade Syrian women." Drawing on such a successful marriage in rural Fayyoun, she observed that "incompatible marriages occur in other countries and not here in Egypt." Rasha Mattai underscored that the Fard Foundation investigated the various rumors concerning specific mosques, observing that these institutions help Syrian women despite the media's vilification of them. Individual misconduct should not implicate the institution as a whole. She gave the example of the case of an employee at the Legal

Association in 6 October City whose main function is to facilitate the marriage process. The employee charged LE 500 to an Egyptian man with the promise of procuring him a Syrian wife. A few weeks later the prospective groom visited the Association with what turns out was a fake receipt for the sum he paid, to inquire as to the delivery date. Eventually the employee was identified and fired. At the same time media pressures forced the Association to issue a public statement noting that they are not in the business of facilitating Syrian-Egyptian marriages. In addition, they posted a huge banner on their premises affirming “We do not deal with Egyptian-Syrian marriages. “

In December 2013 I met Reem, a 35 years old Syrian woman who works as a teacher in a Syrian school in 6 of October City. She came to Cairo with her mother and sister, her father having passed away 10 years prior to the war. Reem listed many reasons for coming to Egypt, among others, in contrast to Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon Egypt has no refugee camps, life is cheap, and the perception that they would be welcome in Egypt. The reality though as they found out upon arrival was much different in the Egyptian everyday. Reem argues that Syrian women in Egypt are perceived as “victims of war, who only came to Egypt to marry.” Reem insists that the phenomena of Egyptian-Syrian marriages after 2011 is overplayed by the media, and constitutes only a small percentage of Syrian women living in Egypt. She describes these marriages as “temporary, they will not last,” adding that Egyptian men who seek to marry Syrian refugee women are desperate men and the Syrian families that accept their daughters to get married are families that simply want to get rid of the burden of excess daughters.

Samar, a 35 year old woman who came to Egypt with her husband and two children in 2012, is the head of the Syrian Association in Egypt. I met her at Tadamon

where she is active around women's rights issues. In my interview with her she questioned the National Council for Women figures concerning Egyptian-Syrian marriages, calling them "rumors and lies." Driven by the media frenzy in the spring of 2013 she and others from the Syrian Association visited mosques, including the Hossary mosque, and NGOs to ascertain what exactly is happening regarding the phenomena of Syrian-Egyptian marriages. According to Samar, the Egyptian media exaggerates the phenomena, during her investigation she only came across 1 or 2 cases. Samar was insistent that Syrians in Egypt do not see marriage as a survival strategy. As she put it, "Syrian women are queens, not commodities." She highlighted that Syrians already register as refugees and hence are given food and protection from the United Nations, and "do not need to marry Egyptians".

On January 7, 2014 I met Umm Sawsan, a 60 year old woman who came to Egypt in 2012 with her husband and daughter. She works as a handicraft instructor at Tadamon as part of the organizations strategy to train women to work in the thriving Syrian informal economy. In conversation with Umm Sawsan and three other women, they made it clear that they, like most Syrian women, want to find work and that marriage to an Egyptian man is not an option they ever considered. Acknowledging that life is not easy in Egypt, at the same time they asserted that "it is not easy to integrate into a new society through marriage." They believed that marriage to an Egyptian in this climate would be difficult "not because we are Syrians, but because media reports portray us as taking away Egyptian men." Although Omm Sawsan disagreed, the other three women insisted that Egyptian society was hostile due to the perceived competition over jobs and men. Another woman joined the conversation and recounted a recent incident while

walking down a street, “two Egyptian women noticed identified me as Syrian due to my scarf , grabbed my hand and asked me ” are you coming to take our men?” Sanaa, a 40 year old single woman also joined to group and shared her experiences of verbal harassment by Egyptian women on the metro. For Saana, Syrian women are under attack in Egypt, perceived as “passive, helpless, even though they make the choice to leave Syria and to come to Egypt.”

A few days later I attended another Tadamon handicraft training session when the conversation regarding Syrian-Egyptian marriages unfolded. Sanaa pointed out that she does not know any Syrian women that opted for marriage with Egyptian men. For Saana, marriage is not an option in a host country, as she put it, “if you have a will you can do anything.” Others countered that marriage does open doors in Egypt. The main breadwinner of a family consisting of her sister and daughter, a 40 year old woman from Homs, noted that if she received an offer for her 16 year old daughter she would consider it, She wants to marry her daughter irrespective if he is Egyptian or not, “ but remember that Syrian men who come to Egypt have no jobs so how they will marry?!” Om Bassem, a 55 year old woman who came to Egypt with her neighbor, her husband and daughter having refused to leave Syria, intervened observing that the issue here is not the arranged marriage, as “love can come after marriage,” but the structural inequality between Syrian women and Egyptian men. Syrian women not only lack economic and social networks in Egypt, but in the current climate men that seek to marry Syrian women do so based on the vulnerability discourse perpetuated by the media, “as if they are doing us a favor by marrying Syrian women.”

The Politics of Charity and Job Markets

Sanaa recalls that when Syrians first came to Egypt in 2011 Egyptians offered them plates of food. Infuriated by these acts of charity, she argues that “we are not beggars, we need to work, and I can work more than ten hours per day, we are strong women and strong women do not play victims.” When she first came to Egypt she worked in a textile factory. When the owner found out that she was Syrian he offered to marry Egypt through the services provided by charitable organization that he is involved in.. She subsequently quit the job, commenting that Egyptian men perceive all Syrian women as available for marriage largely due to myths circulating through the media. Likewise, Safaa, a 35 years old Syrian woman came to Egypt in 2012 with her parents, argued that given the yellow card, poverty is not a reason for any of these marriages. However, any support received from the Egyptian community, so Safaa, is solely with the intension of pressuring families to give their daughters in marriage.

Almost all the Syrian women I met in this fieldwork insisted that they want to work. However, traditional venues of women’s informal labor in the Egyptian economy are closed to Syrian women, especially domestic work. While this is a niche in which Sudanese and other refugees easily find work, due to the fear that the fair haired and lighter skinned Syrian women will seduce men in the household. Organizations such as Tadamon integrate Syrian women into the fast growing Syrian economy in Egypt. Food and handicrafts sold with the label “Made in Syria” has become a stable feature in Egypt’s cities. These economic circuits are furthermore significant in the creation of a

new Syrian community in Egypt. The women I spoke with countered the accusations that their presence is “causing social and economic anxieties,” by claiming that their work does not compete with Egyptians but rather opens new markets in the country.“ In the words of Israa, “Syrian women are not here for marriages.” The women I talked to at Tadamon are strong women committed to living their lives on their own terms irrespective of the constraints imposed upon them. As Saana recalls her first flat in Egypt where the owner of the flat kept a spare key. The owner would frequently come into her flat using the key unannounced shouting at Saana, “Where is he hiding?” When Sanaa would ask her what she meant by “he”, the flat owner replied,” The Egyptian man you have a relationship with.” Irrespective of the difficulties of life in Egypt, Saana asserts “but this will not lead us to marry Egyptian men.”

Chapter 3

Marriage Brokers, the Creation of New Markets and Social Media

The myth of Syrian-Egyptian marriages rejuvenated old businesses and inspired new brokers to enter the market. Marriage brokers traded on this myth and established new markets for Syrian-Egyptian marriages. Members of the Syrian community I interviewed described Syrian-Egyptian marriages as “market makers” far removed from the functions of “marriage brokers.” At the height of the business in 2013/2014 the

Syrian community in Cairo launched online campaigns on social media to condemn these new business practices.

The History of Matchmaking in Egypt

Matchmaking has a long history in Egypt. Historically the *Khatba* was a woman who visited families in their homes with a collection of pictures of brides and grooms for the families to choose from. Alongside the *Khatba* there was and is family matchmaking, the assistance of friends and relatives. (Shawky, 2012) More recently a commercial industry of marriage brokers largely replaced the *Khatba*, match making moving from a cultural activity to an economic service. Today the marriage brokers are competing against online marriage services on Facebook. One of the most important characteristics of the matchmaking process is the social reputation of the match-maker. Brokers and agencies I interviewed agree that social reputation is their capital. No definite numbers of actually registered or licensed companies for matchmaking in Egypt are available. With the move to the internet, there has been a growth of unlicensed agencies. Licensed or unlicensed, a brick and mortar business or a virtual one, all survive on the commissions charged for the services rendered.

There are two categories of brokers in Egypt. Agencies and individuals that work through their networks, charitable organizations or through social media, predominantly Facebook. Brokers who work in an agency charged fixed fees agreed upon by the family and the broker. Individuals who look for marriage partners visit the agency, fill out the application with the desired characteristics of the potential spouse, and pay a LE 200 fee, “non-refundable” as Mahmoud a broker I interviewed underscored. In February 2014 I

spoke with Mahmoud, a broker who worked in a matchmaking agency in Giza, whose number I found on Facebook on a page called An Office for Matchmaking in Egypt. The agency was started in 2007 with the aim, so Mahmoud, to match those “over aged people who fail to find life partners.” He told me that before the emergence of social media, mainly Facebook, they used to advertise thorough flyers. With the rise of social media it became easier to advertise, “we usually post more than ten offers daily and we get double the replies.” If the clients find a suitable match, the agency arranges a meeting of both potential partners, “if the match works then each partner pays 500 LE, if not then they are not required to pay anything.”

The Emerging Role of Brokers in Syrian-Egyptian Marriages

Brokers, in addition to the media, played an instrumental role in the phenomena of Syrian -Egyptian marriages in the year 2013 on their Facebook pages. Marriage agencies are common in Egypt, but the availability of Syrian women presumably ready for marriage emerged with the Syrian civil war in 2011. Mahmoud, the previously mentioned broker, noted that following the January 25, 2011 revolution the industry was at a standstill. “we got paralyzed, until Syrians came to Egypt, new markets opened for us in the industry.” Some Syrians who came to Egypt did not have enough money to pay for the application or the commission after the marriage, “hence we agreed to find marriages for them as a refreshment for the market.” Mahmoud argued that in requests from Syrian women to marry Egyptian men “we get our commission from the Egyptian suitor.” Mahmoud gave me an example of a Syrian man who contacted the agency a suitor for his twenty year old daughter. The father told him that he “ wanted a suitor as soon as

possible, a man who can afford to shelter her and also her family.” Mahmoud refused to give me more details, but he told me that most Syrians marry because they are seeking protection and shelter. Matchmaker jobs are not restricted to men. I met Ebtesam, a Sudanese woman, at Borsa café in downtown Cairo. Upon hearing of my project she refused the interview, and merely said, “some Syrian women want to marry Egyptian men, we are not forcing them to do so.”

Brokers who work in charitable organizations dedicated to helping the underprivileged, such as Resala, and Orman, rely on their networks to arrange marriages for women. This type of broker does not take a commission, in the words of a worker at Hamad mosque, they are doing it “for God’s sake.” I visited Hamad mosque in affluent Togammu Khamis at the beginning of 2014 as I had heard from Syrian women that this mosque was involved in Syrian- Egyptian matchmaking. I went during Friday prayer and met a man involved in match-making who said to me that he is engaged in “a scared act” when he tries to match a “weak Syrian woman” to an Egyptian man who will take care of her. He argued that Syrian women who came to Egypt after the Syrian crisis are weak; they are not able to raise money or provide a shelter, Syrian women needed a push to stay in Egypt and “marriage to an Egyptian man will be the push.” He refused to tell me any stories about Syrians in Egypt, but he told me that he would continue to match Syrian women to Egyptian men as “protecting vulnerable women is achieved through marriage.” Overhearing our conversation, his colleague noted to me that this is the project of an individual man and not a project of Hamad mosque. Rasha Maatai from the Fard Foundation argues that it is individual mosque employees that give mosques a bad reputation for personal financial gain “no matter what will happen to the Syrian women

after marrying Egyptian men.” In an article published in Daily News Egypt ElMasry (2012) described this kind of marriage as a “business deal” in which it is the matchmakers that benefit the most in this process. Citing Abeer Ali, a project coordinator for Fostat Association concerned with women’s empowerment, she argues that brokers receive a fee from Egyptian men to find the “right” girl, meaning young and beautiful, thereafter the broker’s main role is to convince the parents that their future depends on the marriage of their daughter.

Give the political and economic situation in Egypt, one broker told me that “the only thing Egyptian men can offer Syrian refugees is to marry Syrian women.” One Syrian woman from Homs I met in 2013 cynically commented “is there no other way to help us out than marriages?” She argued that the Syrian women were caught in a vicious cycle between brokers who were desperate to revive their business, Islamic preachers who labeled Syrian -Egyptian marriages as a religious duty on the part of Egyptian men, and the anti-Morsi media that aggressively deployed the myth for its own purposes. In other words, everyone was gaining at the expense of the Syrian community at large, and Syrian women in particular. I met Esraa through a Facebook group called Syrian Students in Egypt. I communicated with her and a friend of hers over a number of weeks in 2013. Both women commented that brokers approached them on Facebook aggressively trying to persuade them to marry an Egyptian man. One of the brokers sent her a message promising her a better life, with an Egyptian husband “you can make a new family replacing the one you lost.” While Esraa has no problem with cross-cultural marriages, with brokers and mosque employees pressuring families and young women to marry Egyptian men for their own gains,, “but,” she argued, “not now and not here.”

Facebook and its Role in Syrian-Egyptian Marriages

In 2013 Facebook, next to mosques, were the main sites for match-making between Syrian women and Egyptian men with pages advertising "Syrian Women for Marriage in Egypt"¹, and "Syrian Women for Marriages in Egypt with a guarantee to their Rights"² mostly moderated by Egyptians. Ali Salah, one such a broker, argued that Syrian-Egyptian marriage is a mutual beneficial process, with another broker suggesting that such marriages "open opportunities" in a world of "locked doors" for Syrians in Egypt. On September 9, 2013 I spoke with Yasser a broker who runs a Facebook page called "Syrian Women for Marriage in Egypt." Yasser refused to meet with me, but agreed on a telephone conversation. Yasser argued that he is doing something good for Syrian women by offering them marriage "something that is socially acceptable, they are displaced, cannot find a job and do not have money so marriage will save their life." Yasser concurred that the marriage brokerage industry was at its peak during Muslim Brotherhood rule in Egypt, as he put it, "we are allowed to match-make between Syrians and Egyptians without being afraid," although not registered or licensed, brokers could work freely," Yasser asserted that now "Syrian people are treated as if they are Egyptian citizens, Syrian women must find a home, yet how will they find a home without marriage?"

"Refugees, not Captives" is the name of a Facebook Group that began in 2012 drawing attention to women's rights in contexts of displacement, I was drawn to this

¹ <https://www.facebook.com/groups/489448917815339/>

² <https://www.facebook.com/groups/269102519920767/>.

group as it stood in stark contrast to the many humanitarian campaigns on Facebook collecting funds for food, money or blankets. I communicated with the Syria based administrator of the page via email. She blamed the Egyptian media for the production of a discourse of Syrian women's vulnerability in Egypt, noting that marriages that become a phenomenon become an immoral and unacceptable act." The administrator of a Facebook page called "Syrians in Egypt" whom I contacted in January 2013, commented that "the phenomena of Syrian-Egyptian marriages is the outcome of the pressures that Syrians face in Egypt., certainly marriage facilitates their life in Egypt, but it comes without any guarantees." This administrator suggested that many these marriages are "temporary acts," until women return to Syria or are resettled in a third country. The contrast between "Refugees and not Captives" and "Syrians in Egypt" is an interesting one. "Refugees and not Captives" is administered by a woman whose main focus is to provide strength, self-confidence, and tools for survival for displaced Syrian women. "Syrians in Egypt" is founded by a man who argues that Syrian-Egyptian marriages can be a temporary strategic survival mechanism, a form of aid, for displaced Syrian women and their families.

Mohamed Medo, an Egyptian marriage broker on Facebook who refused to name his Facebook page, markets his business within a rights discourse. The stated aim of Medo is to preserve the rights of Syrian women in the marriage process, "Most people believe that Syrian women do not have rights in Egyptian marriages as it is enough for them to just get married." In a discussion that lasted over six hours, Medo claimed that his goal is "to make sure that Syrian women have rights in the marriage process, such as a dowry and an agreement on basic needs that is acceptable to the bride." Commenting

on the diversity of the Syrian community in Egypt, from women whose sole aim is to find basic shelter and financial support to women “who are very clever in selecting an Egyptian husband, for without negotiating an acceptable arrangement there is no reason for them to get married in the first place.” Syrian women, he commented, are not naive. Medo informed me that he created this group to help Egyptian men deal with the Egyptian marriage crisis due to rising costs and demands of marriage in Egypt and offer marriages to Syrian women on their own terms, in short, a marriage that is of mutual benefit to both. Medo was forthcoming with the fact that some brokers take advantage of Syrian families, however, he argued, he works with a Syrian mayor in 6 October City to assure fairness on all sides. As he put it, “we offer this service and take money in return.”

“Syrian women for Marriages in Egypt,³” is a Facebook page on which Egyptian men post their ads. In August 2013 I read the following post “I am Mohammed from Egypt and I want to marry a Syrian woman.” The very minimalist posting caught my attention as most of these postings are rather elaborate in terms of self-description and requirements for a prospective wife. I communicated with Mohammed and he informed me that he wanted to marry a Syrian woman because it was cheap to do so, “I can only rent a flat with cheap rent, I can only pay 1000 LE as a dowry, 500 LE to the broker and 500 LE to the family or to her if she comes to Egypt alone.” He never gave any personal information about himself beyond his financial status, rather our communication focused on exaggerated costs and expectations in Egyptian marriages. In short, he cannot afford to get married in Egypt, and this opportunity is his only chance.

³ <https://www.facebook.com/groups/489448917815339/>

On October 2013 another post read as follows: “I am Ahmed from Egypt, divorced, 37 years old, I am searching for a Syrian wife that is into commitment and is ready to make family.” When I contacted him through a Facebook message I had a sense that he was treating his search as if he were selecting a wife from a catalogue including the stereotypical blond hair and green eyes. In our communication Ahmad asserted that it is virtually impossible for him to find an Egyptian wife on his own terms and conditions, that is, he wanted a virgin wife not a widowed, divorced or “old” woman.

his chance is rare to marry another Egyptian woman with his own terms and conditions. This is because he did not want to marry a widowed, divorced, or an old Egyptian woman. In May 2014 an anonymous posting read: “ I am 43 years old, Egyptian and Muslim, I want to marry a second Syrian wife because my first wife is suffering from some personal circumstances. My height is 183 cm and my weight 90 kilos, I want her to be beautiful, slim , and she must be willing to get pregnant.” This is the first post that I read in which a man described his physical features, suggesting that a potential wife needed to be as slim and fit as he presumably is. His reference to pregnancy, suggests that his first wife is infertile. This anonymous post suggests that the man is seeking an obedient wife willing to perform the stereotypical roles assigned to women in Egyptian society.

“ I am a divorced Egyptian man with only two children. I want a Syrian wife that loves my children and can act as their mother. I am well off, and I want her to be between 20 and 29 years old.” Posted in November 2013, this ad elicited many angry comments from particularly Syrian men. They read this post as degrading to Syrian women, suggesting that Egyptian men were looking for Syrian wives to act as maids and

servants to themselves and their children. Egyptian men replied that it is normal to ask a potential wife to take care of the husbands children from a previous marriage. The tense exchanges ended with Syrian men urging Egyptian men to marry Egyptian women as “Syrians are our women.”

Numerous Facebook pages hosted by Syrians sought to intervene in the matchmaking industry with names such as “Refugees not Captives,” “Fighting Syrian-Egyptian Marriages”⁴ “Alert to end all pages on Facebook that support Syrian-Egyptian Marriages”⁵ All of these pages are fighting the misrepresentations of Syrian women caused by marriage brokers in Egypt and media reports using the same social media tools. These pages aimed at presenting “the true picture of Syrian women” in Egypt, with quotes such as “I do not want to marry; I want to work and be educated.” While many of these pages were very critical of Syrian women who even thought of engaging in these kinds of marriages, yet noted that “Syrian women are free, these are stories of rumors.” The pages highlighted that Syrian women do not need marriage brokers to match them with Egyptian men, “we are not going to sell ourselves.” Many administrators of these pages denied that there is a marriage brokerage industry focused on facilitating Syrian-Egyptian marriages, suggesting that this is a construction of the Egyptian media. For Syrians, one page argued, do not to marry under any circumstances, “they only marry out of love and respect.” The myth of Syrian-Egyptian marriages was not only countered in social media in 2013, but also at Tadaomon where I conducted most of my fieldwork. In their monthly open dialogue sessions on Syrian

⁴ <https://www.facebook.com/MharbhZwajAlmsrynMnAllajyatAlswryat>

⁵ <https://www.facebook.com/groups/362829343835087/>.

rights in Egypt much emphasis was placed on disarticulating the image of migrants as silent and oppressed and instead foster an image of migrant women who possess confidence and independence.

Economic Transactions in Cross-border Marriages

Money transactions are part and parcel of the cross border marriages. Thuraya, a Syrian woman I interviewed, argued that Syrian-Egyptian marriages is a commercial practice in which money plays a great role, adding that “these marriages are an absolute economic benefit for the brokers” Brokers, so Thuraya, take money from Egyptian men and Egyptian men take advantage of Syrian women and their families. She believes that the only disadvantaged partner in Syrian-Egyptian marriages is the Syrian woman.

In the regular matchmaking process there are two flows of money: the money for the dowry and the commission of matchmakers. The money is given in the form of cash to matchmakers and the parents of the bride as stipulated by prior agreement, there is no fixed commission that covers the process of matchmaking. In the Syrian-Egyptian marriage context, the flow of money differs primarily in that the dowry is small at best and symbolic in most cases. Ahmed Medo, the broker I mentioned previously, estimates that the average money exchanged for the dowry ranges from 500 to 800 LE. In other words, the dowry being a symbolic exchange, the real value of the marriage lies in “other advantages.” Medo lists these “other advantages” as security and residency.

Chapter 4

New Families, Networking and Building Syrian Communities in Egypt

This chapter focuses on networking and community building among Syrian women in Egypt. Tadamon, and other Syrian led community organizations, heavily invest in promoting the creation of new networks and socialites among the diverse individuals and families that are forging new lives, temporary or permanently in Egypt. Given the dispersal of kin, often times existing only as virtual networks, the creation of a Syrian economy and sociality is at the core of most community work in Egypt. When I first began my fieldwork in Tadamon, Ahmad Mamdouh, the 35 year old Syrian coordinator of the open dialogue series, welcomed me with the provision that I did not ask any direct or indirect political questions for fear of promoting conflict (*mushanat*). Although I abided by these restrictions, whatever the diverse positions taken by my interlocutors regarding the Syrian conflict were, all had expressly fled Syria following attacks against their homes and communities by Assad's troops. The women that I worked with that attended the handicraft training sessions three times a week, came to these sessions primarily to learn new skills in order to find work in the informal Syrian economy in Cairo, but also to overcome their isolation in the absence of family and community back in Syria. As one woman put it, "we are all Syrians who suffer from disintegration in Egyptian society." The majority of the Syrian women whom I met came alone to Egypt without their families, or with partial families either because they lost them to the violence or in some cases husbands, children, extended family refused to leave Syria.

At the same time, while many women commented on feelings of isolation that brought them to Tadamon to begin with, family remains an important pillar for most women. As Reem, a lower middle class woman from Damascus, expressed it, “We do anything for our family to be able to stay together as it is the main pillar in our life.” For Reem individual desires and needs have to be sacrificed for the benefit of the family. Migration decisions by individual members are never an individual choice, so Reem, but a collective choice negotiated with family and kin networks. She came to Egypt in 2012 with what remained of her family and neighbors after having decided to sell their jewelry to finance their trip to Egypt via Jordan. According to Reem, the choice of marriage and especially migration marriage, is based on family needs not individual goals. During times of crisis the collective and individual become one entity, the welfare of each individual and the group being intrinsically connected. While Reem opposes Syrian-Egyptian marriages, she would agree to marry an Egyptian man if this was for the advantage of her family. As she puts it, “some families marry their daughters, believing that it is a solution for their financial and social problems in Egypt, we should not blame them for that. Individuals at times have to sacrifice their life for the common good of the family of which they are a member. “

Families

In one of the focus groups I conducted at Tadamon in December 2013, I met Zeinab a 43 year old woman from Homs, who came to Egypt with her two daughters and son, a sister and her brother in-law. Zainab’s husband refused to come to Egypt, insisting that “he will stay in his country and will die there...there is no need to look for a

new house or a new life elsewhere.” According to Zeinab her 46 year old husband felt that he was too old to search for a job in Egypt “we will die in Egypt from hunger, and we will die in Syria from the war, so lets die in our country.” However, Zainab believed that any work in Egypt was better than staying in Syria to await inevitable death.

Zainab’s husband is among many Syrian men who refused to leave Syria and come to Egypt with their families. Samar, another interlocutor, observed that many Syrian men were reluctant to leave their houses and life in Syria to venture into the uncertain world of an immigrant in Egypt.

Zainab informed me that when they came to Egypt, the only man in her family that left with them was her brother-in-law. Upon arrival in Egypt he tried to pressure her to marry her two daughters, both in their twenties, to Egyptian men “in order to survive and be protected in the host country.” Family decisions are always the site of potential struggle and disagreements between individuals and the collective. Zainab refused to marry her daughters to Egyptian men, explaining that her brother-in-law felt the added stress of being expected to assist in providing support for Zainab and her daughters. “He only wanted to get rid of this burden, that is why he wanted my daughter to marry Egyptian men. This however is only a temporary solution.” While her brother in law was overwhelmed with patriarchal perceptions of the responsibilities of the only male accompanying the family to Egypt, Zeinab proved him wrong and found other survival strategies.

Some Syrian women, and some Syrian families, will accept marriages with Egyptian men to improve their circumstances in Egypt. For instance, I met a woman on the streets of 6 October City who approached me and said “I am your sister from Syria

and I want you to help me” showing me her paper work to prove her claim. When I attempted to solicit her views on Syrian Egyptian marriages, she responded that “ if there is such a thing I would have married for shelter (*ma’wa*) and money.” I met another family with an Islamic background from Homs during my visit to Hamd Mosque in Togammu Khamis in January 2014. While her husband was waiting outside, she informed me that “she is not against Syrian-Egyptian marriages if it offers Syrian women a good life characterized by a religious husband who knows how to provide a secure life for his wife.” The role of women, she continued, is to stay at home and support her husband and family. The Egyptian media, she argued, was exaggerating the degrading aspects of such unions, instead, “marriage is what will protect Syrian women from any harm in Egypt.” Outside the mosque I met another woman buying goods from one of the stalls. She conceded that Hamd Mosque had arranged for numerous Syrian-Egyptian marriages, but would not publicly admit this as “they are afraid of the media.” According to her, it was predominantly families with an Islamic background that opted for such marriages in the hope that these “will act as a sort of protection for women in Egypt.”

Zainab had travelled to Egypt as a tourist 10 years before the outbreak of the civil war. This among others motivated her choice to leave Syria with her children, and this is why she selected Egypt in particular. Yet, upon arriving in Egypt 2013 she felt unwelcome, and treated as a foreigner, convincing her that they cannot live by themselves in a country in which they are perceived as unwelcome strangers. Commenting on the fear that Syrians will take away job and marriage opportunities from Egyptians, she countered that “we are not here to take away any opportunities, we are here to live”. For Zainab to live translates into learning a marketable skill“ so that I can

earn some money and my daughters and son are looking for work as well.” She and her adult children are exerting much effort to work and are look for other opportunities to be able to stay in Egypt, “ my son applied for post graduate study at Cairo University so that he can renew his visa so we can stay for a longer time, we tried to renew our visa, and we were trying to save some money as well.” Although Zainab and her family are looking for an opportunity to purchase a flat “instead of paying rent each month,” she was insistent that Syrian-Egyptian marriages are not the answer even though an added benefit would be to receive official papers to stay in Egypt. One of the primary reasons that Zeinab is adamantly against these marriages is her conviction that given the myth that drives this phenomena these marriages will not last. Even if the daughters would have agreed to their uncles proposal, Zeinab would have not permitted them to go ahead with such an arrangement. For Zainab, women who want to marry must consult and take the approval of their family first. Ahlam, another interlocutor, observed that “ there are a lot of Syrian women who came to Egypt without a father, or brother, and hence women “have to make their own decisions.” These women do not have the option to make decisions in consultation with their families, “ life forced Syrian women to make decisions by themselves. ”

I interviewed a Syrian father at Tadamon whom I met at an open dialogue session on “ How to cope in Egyptian society.” He came to Egypt with his two daughters in 2013. He expressed his belief that his daughters have the free will to decide whom they will marry but with the family consent. He does not categorically oppose Syrian-Egyptian marriages, arguing that Syrian-Egyptian marriages are a good venue to help Syrian women escaping the civil war, or the trauma of having witnessed the death of family

members. Despite pressures from Egyptian neighbors, in his words, they tried to help us and “I am too shy to refuse their proposals” he ended up rejecting one proposal as his daughter did not want to marry an Egyptian man in a situation where “she is forced to do so.” Both of his daughters decided that they are not marrying Egyptian men as they feel that Egyptian society is taking advantage of their situation. The Father is convinced that he cannot force his daughter to marry Egyptian men as “we came from an outer conflict, and I cannot be a cause an inner conflict in my daughters.” The father argued that the decision of marriage should be based on the consent of both the family and individual involved carefully evaluating the advantages and disadvantages. The individual motivations behind Syrian-Egyptian marriages among the Syrian community are diverse. Families that pressure their daughters into such arrangements do so out of “greed and the lack of conscience” was the angry response of another man I met at Tadamon. Likewise, a Syrian graduate student who came to Egypt in 2012, expressed his sentiments as follows “With all my respect; it is a degrading way for Syrian women, families use social pressure to persuade their daughters to marry so that they can legally stay in Egypt.” According to him Syrian women can find many other ways to stay in Egypt beyond marriage. He himself enrolled in a Masters degree at Faculty of Commerce at Cairo University, “it is a cheap university in which I can continue my studies and stay in Egypt.”

At a Tadamon event in June 2014 intended to bring Egyptians and Syrians closer together through food and culture, in conversations with Syrian women they noted that too much emphasis has been placed on poverty as a driving force behind such marriages. Young women, they contended, can work. The overriding factor they argued was

security. A Syrian woman who refused to tell me even her name told me that we came to Egypt “as we know that they will not place us in camps where there is limited mobility.” The high incidents of sexual violence in camps, she continued, has resulted in the lowering of the marriage age for young girls, including child marriages. Hence, if the choice comes down to marrying Egyptian men or having to leave Egypt, “we will then marry Egyptian men.” According to a UNHCR report (2008), forced displacement devastates individuals and families, with migration marriages often deemed as the only option. The report further highlights that forced displacement transforms family hierarchies, often replacing men as the providers of the household (also see Grabska). The emergence of women as providers, and in many cases sole providers, for their households certainly attests to the impact of forced displacement on the lives of my interlocutors. Other strategies include marriages under duress whereby women assist their natal families. These marriages often enable family reunification, and hence efforts to rebuild the family. For Syrian women in Egypt, marriage to an Egyptian man secures residency for their immediate family.

Power relations within family structures is another issue that kept being raised during my fieldwork. Most of the Syrian women I met were against Syrian-Egyptian marriages due to the dominant perception of Syrian women as victims “who will agree to marry at any cost.” As one interlocutor put it, the predominant perception among the Egyptian public is “that at least in Egypt we do not live in camps.” Safaa observes that expectations on both sides are high. Egyptian men expect women “to sacrifice

everything” for the privilege of being “rescued” into a marriage, whereas Syrian families have inflated expectations as to the benefits that these marriages bring to the women’s natal family unit. For Safaa, as to many of my other interlocutors, given the structural inequalities these marriages are temporary “divorce will happen as the success of a marriage must be based on equal partners.” One interlocutor went so far as to suggest that Syrian parents that permit their daughters to marry within this context are contributing to the perception of Syrian women as vulnerable victims predominant in the Egyptian public sphere in 2013.

The effects of the myth also inform the relationships that Syrian brides have with their Egyptian in-laws. Media constructions in 2013, so Safaa, presented Syrians as attempting “to solve their problems through marriage,” hence Egyptian families look down upon Syrian woman as if she is marrying only for economic benefit. My interlocutors mentioned the resistance of future mother in laws to their son’s desire to marry “a foreign bride when his cousin is more suitable for him.” Finally, with the expectations of the prospective husband and his family of an obedient wife “grateful for having been rescued,” conflicting expectations regarding the wife’s commitments to her new family as opposed to her natal family further contributes to the temporariness of the marriages. While engagement with Egyptian society is a core feature of organizations such as Tadamon, as my interlocutors note however “we are working hard to engage with Egyptian society by other means than marrying Egyptians.”

Community Building and Networking through Mosques and Non-Governmental Organizations

Mosques played an important function in assisting Syrians upon arrival in Egypt, providing them with flats and financial resources on an interim basis. Adel ElShaarawy in a report for the BBC (AboKhadra, 2013) argued that Hossary mosque in particular assisted Syrian women and provided them with basic aid. Rasha El Maati from the Fard Foundation likewise observed that mosques “are the institutions that helped Syrian women in Egypt.” Mosques furthermore offered Syrian women a sense of community. One of the Syrian women whom I met at Hammad mosque in Togammu Khamis , told me that “I was desperate and needed to create new networks.” The mosques, she continued, provided her with a sense of community that she had lost back in Syria. Referring to Hammad mosque in particular, she noted that “now in Egypt I have another family,” the mosque providing the space for Syrian families in Egypt to congregate and getting to know each other. Likewise, Tadamon provided a social space for Syrian women to meet, talk , work and eat together. For the women I spoke with Tadamon felt “like a part of Syria.” I asked them why they go to Tadamon three days per week and they replied that they structure their life around this organization. Tadamon gives them a sense of community, “we don’t want anything except to feel that we are not out of Syria.” In addition to serving as an important nexus for community building, NGO’s such as Tadamon trained women in skills that allowed them to participate in the expanding Syrian economy in Egypt.

Concluding Thoughts

This thesis explored different dimensions of cross-border and migration marriages, including the role of the media, marriage brokers, families. The research

highlighted ways in which representations of gender roles impact migration marriages, and ways in which Syrian women challenged these representations and assumptions.

A key factor that comes out of this research is the question of the family's role in cross-border marriages. I have argued throughout the thesis that family played a great role in cross border marriages as they are important agents of decision-making. The thesis showed familial choices navigating desires of individuals and the collective. Migration marriage is a community event. The thesis also showed that Syrian women can create families, not only by marrying Egyptian men, but through the building of their own communities and networks.

Finally, another interesting outcome from the fieldwork is the strength of Syrian women in Egypt. Syrian women left their country, their homes and their husbands to seek a new life in another country. They did not fear the unknown conditions that awaited them, but sought life in neighboring countries. This contrasts starkly with the construction Syrian women as victims in the Egyptian media and public sphere. Syrian women were able to take the risks and face the challenges and opportunities that awaited them in Egypt.

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